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ABSTRACT

Proofreading can be tedious and boring, especially if it is approached as correcting errors. But proofreading is not correcting errors so much as reviewing the paper for ideas and for readability. Sometimes classmates can help a student proofread--they can help assess the draft, propose some alternative solutions, and make some choices. This paper covers two different kinds of proofreading: proofreading for revising or rewriting, which involves major reworking of the paper; and proofreading for editing, which involves working primarily with sentences: rephrasing them, clarifying them, correcting grammatical and mechanical mistakes. The paper does not address "true revision"--which involves a global rethinking of the purposes and intent of the draft. Instead, the strategies offered in the paper are designed to help students review a paper that is beyond the invention stage. The paper's first set of strategies address proofreading for revising: how to review a draft for the presentation of ideas--writers should use this section to help them with papers that are still in draft. The paper's second set of strategies address proofreading for editing: how to review a near-final version of a paper to ensure that clues have been provided for the reader to help him/her read the text easily--it deals with things such as clarity in sentences, as well as addressing some common errors people make. (NKA)

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How to Proofread and Edit Your Writing
A Guide for Student Writers

M C Morgan
Bemidji State University
Writing Resource Center

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Proofreading is a pain. There's no doubt about it. It can be tedious and boring--if you approach it as correcting errors. But proofreading isn't correcting errors so much as it involves reviewing the paper for ideas and for readability. It allows you to read your draft, to consider what you've written, and to change your mind. It's an opportunity to clarify--for yourself as well as for your reader--what you've said and to make some choices. Proofreading is in your control, no one else's. No one, really, can proofread for you because the kinds of changes that come form proofreading are changes in your meaning, your intent, and your purpose in the draft. But while no one can proofread for you, others, a classmate, or a writing assistant at the Writing Resource Center, can help you proofread; they can help you assess the draft, propose some alternative solutions, and make some choices. So, while proofreading can be tedious, it doesn't have to be lonely.

This handout covers two different kinds of proofreading:

> proofreading for revising or rewriting, which involves major reworking of the paper: rearranging the order of paragraphs, cutting material, adding new paragraphs and sections, and so on.
>
> proofreading for editing, which involves working primarily with sentences: rephrasing them, clarifying them, correcting grammatical and mechanical mistakes.

Each kind of proofreading involves different strategies. Many writers, however, have developed only one technique to cover both revising and editing.

This handout doesn't address "true revision" - which involves a global re-thinking of the purposes and intents of the draft. Instead, the strategies offered here are designed to help you review a paper that is beyond the invention stage.

The first set of strategies address Proofreading for Revising: How to review a draft for the presentation of ideas. Use this section to help you work with a paper that is still in draft, that needs work with the ideas. Keep in mind that at this stage there are no hard and fast "rules" to appeal to. Instead, you need to be flexible. Use this section to help you review a draft with an eye to focusing, organizing, and developing it.

The second set of strategies address Proofreading for Editing: how to review a near-final version of your paper to ensure that you have provided cues for the reader to help him or her read the text easily. This section deals with things such as clarity in sentences, as well as addressing some common sentence errors people make. We don't present the "rules" of grammar here; instead, we present some strategies for finding and fixing some common sentence problems. Use this section to help you review a near-final version of a paper with an eye to polishing it.

General Strategies for All Proofreading

> Allow yourself some time between writing and proofreading. You need the time so that you can get some distance from what you have written and return to it with a fresh mind and eye.
>
> Keep in mind that you're writing for people who are not present and often not very willing to put a lot of effort into making sense of the paper. You can't expect them to get inside your head and understand what you mean to say; you can't expect them to guess at what you might mean; and you can't expect them to fill in gaps or connect ideas you haven't explicitly connected yourself. You have to make sure you say all you need to say so that your readers can understand you without having to work too hard at it. Many teacher-readers value clarity and explicitness. They value being able to get to the ideas in the paper without being hindered by sentence-level errors; and they value writing that makes connections between ideas and presents the implications of those ideas.
>
> Don't try to proofread for everything at once. Make a number of passes through the paper. First, make a number of passes to proofread for revising. Then, after you've made any changes you need, make another set of passes to proofread for editing, watching for a different problem or concern each time.

Keep in mind that in proofreading for editing, you're not trying to change every sentence that you've written. If you find you're doing so, you might need to proofread for revising! Editing a draft for everything is tedious and boring. Use the adage, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." If a sentence or a paragraph seems adequate, leave it. Keep yourself focused on the difficulties you encounter.

Specific Strategies for All Proofreading

Read the paper all the way through silently. Don't necessarily look for errors. Instead, check for general readability. Do you stumble over phrases or find it difficult to understand a particular sentence? Do you find yourself getting lost in a difficult passage or paragraph? If so, don't fix it right away but mark the margin so you can return to the passage later. Keep reading. Return to the marked passages after you have read the entire paper through.

Read the paper aloud. This doesn't require an audience. Instead, listen to yourself. Are the sentences varied enough in length to avoid monotony? (You'll sense this if you sound monotonous!) Is there needless repetition of ideas? Does the draft seem to drift from the point and then back again? Do you become lost or confused about what it says? Again, don't stop to fix anything but keep reading all the way through. Mark the margin where you happen on problems and come back to them later.

Section I: Proofreading for Revising a Draft

Proofreading for revising (an approach many experienced writers use) involves re-reading and re-thinking. It can involve role-playing, either by playing the role of your audience (the skeptical teacher-reader) or by playing the "dumb" reader, one who simply refuses to understand at first. Playing the role of a reader helps you to remember that writing, unlike conversation, does not provide the reader with an opportunity for clarification or restatement, that you have to provide them in the paper from the first.

Proofreading for revising demands that

- You re-read the text carefully, slowly, closely, as you might read a textbook when studying for an exam.
- You play the role of a reader rather than the writer.
- You have some specific strategies to help you examine the draft in order to identify problems, to evaluate what's wrong, and to come up with and select alternative solutions.

Strategies for Revising for Thesis/Focus

Getting Ready

Re-read the paper, attempting to locate your thesis statement (central proposition, main assertion, or point). Write this on another piece of paper. If your thesis isn't directly stated, write down a possible thesis from what you've read in your paper. On the same sheet, write down what you want this paper to do, specifically: what you want the reader to think or feel while reading the paper, or what you're trying to show in the paper. This statement of purpose probably won't appear in your paper; you're writing it down to keep it in mind as you make some choices.

Next, read each paragraph, attempting to determine the central idea of each. Try to capture each paragraph in a phrase or two presenting what the paragraph says and what the paragraph does. Be specific as possible. If you cannot decide on one phrase, list two or three options. (This little paragraph title is called a gloss.) As you work, list the glosses in order underneath your thesis statement.

Getting an overview

Consider the relationship between the thesis and your paragraph glosses on your sheet. Now you have to make some choices and decisions. Do the ideas of your paragraphs clearly connect to the thesis you wrote down? If not, should you re-write the thesis or eliminate the paragraph? Are the paragraphs in an order that allows a new reader to follow your development, or might another order work better? Are there duplicate or near duplicate ideas in different paragraphs?

- Does what you're saying in the paper line up with what you do in the paper?
- Does what you do in the paper support what you say?

Matching the Assignment

Is what you're saying and doing appropriate to the assignment and class?

- Check the assignment again, looking for key terms such as *explain, describe, compare, analyze*, and so on. Does what you're doing meet the terms of the assignment?
- Consider the level of formality you're using. Is it appropriate to the class and assignment? Or is it too stuffy or too casual?

Strategies for Revising for Order and Development

Consider the order of your paragraphs using the glosses. Is there any place where you drifted off the main track for a while and returned to it later?

Check your glosses for what you're doing in each paragraph. Then look at the paragraph itself, considering only the material in that paragraph. What does that paragraph offer to support the phrase you used to describe it in your gloss? Note all the detail, examples, and explanations. Is all this material related enough to be in the same paragraph? Should some of it be in another paragraph?

- Might a paragraph benefit from examples? From more explanation?
- Might it benefit from cutting some examples or explanation?
- Do your examples clearly connect to or support what the paragraph says?

Strategy for revising for overall coherence ("flow")

Look at the transitional ideas between paragraphs. Sometimes, transitions are words or phrases; just as often, they are whole sentences that connect ideas. Decide if you need

- to make the transition more explicit
- to create new transitions where none existed
- to re-arrange the order of your paragraphs to make a transition possible.

Check to see if your transitions are all the same kind. Repeated use of "Also," "As well," or "The next aspect is" should set off an alarm. They suggest that you're making a list and that the draft needs more development. This is the time to decide where might need to add paragraphs that go into more detail about a point.

Repeat as necessary

Notice that while proofreading for revising you might spot a difficulty that sends you back to the beginning of the proofreading process. You might expect that. It doesn't mean you've made a mistake but that you're getting good at making choices. Revising is circular, recursive. Making a change at one place in the draft sends ripples through the entire draft. A writer with flexible strategies is sensitive to the changes and builds on them.

Section II: Proofreading for Editing a Near-Final Draft

Proofreading for editing--for spotting and fixing sentence-level problems--involves two kinds of reading and demands at least two passes through the paper:

- In the first way of reading, you're watching for problematic sentences. These are sentences that do not necessarily have mechanical or grammatical "errors" in them, but are, in some way, awkward. (Teachers mark them AWK or "unclear"). In this reading, you're reading for meaning.
- In the second way of reading, you're watching for mechanical and grammatical "errors," and so you're reading not for meaning so much as for form. These are non-negotiable errors--errors that will call attention to themselves as errors in the paper you're writing. It is commonly said that such errors cause "a breakdown in communication." This isn't really true; most readers can and do read through sentence-level errors and more or less understand what's being said. But these are the kinds of errors that, for the most part, annoy readers, and that--fairly or unfairly--mark the paper as sloppy.

AWK or Confused Sentences and Paramedics

AWK sentences often come about when you're working with unfamiliar and complex ideas, or when you're writing an unfamiliar kind of paper Dealing with AWKward or unclear sentences often demands applying the revision strategies in the first part of this handout to the problem section of the paper. Or, you can use the Paramedic Method of editing to help you find the problem and re-build the sentence. Make an appointment with a writing assistant to get some training in paramedic editing.

As mentioned before, keep in mind that in proofreading for editing, you're not trying to change every sentence that you've written. If you find you're doing so, you might need to proofread for revising! Editing a draft for everything is tedious and boring. Use the adage, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." If a sentence or a paragraph seems adequate, leave it. Keep yourself focused on the difficulties you encounter.

Strategies for Editing for Mechanical and Grammatical Errors

There are a few things to keep in mind when considering errors: Not everyone makes the same kinds of sentence-level errors, no one makes all the kinds of errors possible, few people commit an error in every single sentence they write--most sentences are correct, in fact--and everyone, but everyone, commits grammatical and mechanical errors in their drafts. As well, no native speaker of a language makes real fundamental errors such as getting the order of words wrong. And, finally, the kinds of errors people make tend to change over time; an "error" you make today will clear up as you gain practice in dealing with it.

What's really important, however, is that one's errors tend to fall into patterns: a single kind of error occurs regularly in a draft. This is a virtue because it helps you spot places where you might have made an error. You can skim the draft for those things that cause problems for you and make the corrections.

The strategies presented here do not rely on knowing the rules of grammar, although you will need a little technical knowledge to help you spot errors quickly and independently. Instead, you skim the paper for the kinds of errors you tend to make, and then consider a number of ways you might fix them. This handout gives a number of common errors, tips on how to spot them, and a few ways to deal with them.

The main strategy in editing for error is to know where your problems lie: Is it with spelling? Use of commas? Fragments? Run-on sentences or comma splices? A writing assistant can help you find your common problems; or you might look at the problems your teachers have marked recently.

Along with the strategies for finding errors presented here, refer to the Punctuation Pattern Sheet as a guide to correcting them.

Editing for Spelling & Using Spell-Checkers

Although spelling problems can seem insurmountable, spelling errors usually fall into patterns. Therefore, the first step to proofreading for spelling is

- Keep a list of the words you often misspell.

Looking through a draft for all these words, however, would be too time-consuming. Instead, use the list as a diagnostic sheet to identify error patterns, and use it as a study guide. Memorize the correct spelling of the words.

When you read for spelling, it is easy to become a speedreader rather than a proofreader. One useful strategy for avoiding this pitfall is to

- Read from the end rather than the beginning of the line.

By divorcing the words from the context of the sentence by reading backwards, you'll be able to proof quickly but systematically, and you'll be more likely to catch extra letters and transposed letters.

> **Caution I**: Reading backwards will not allow you to spot homophone errors (words that sound alike but are spelled differently: to/too/two, are/our, their/there/they're, and so on. You have to check these by skimming the paper forward.
>
> **Caution II**: Word processor spell-checkers. Spell checkers simply skim the paper for words that are not in the spell checker's usually limited dictionary. They do not read or understand your paper, and so they can't spot all errors, they may flag as an error a word that is spelled correctly, and they can't spot homophone errors or typos that result in a legitimate word (typing form when you meant from, for example). In a word, spell checkers are dumb. By all means, use a spell checker on a near-final draft. But know that researchers have found that spelling errors don't necessarily decrease when people use spell checkers; in some cases, they increase--and you're still responsible for fixing the errors. Always make a final, human reading of a paper for homophone errors and typos: that is, proofread it for meaning.

Editing for commas in compound sentences

Skim the paper, looking only for the seven coordinators: *and, but, or, for, so, nor, yet.*

> If you typically have trouble placing commas in compound sentences, scan the paper for the seven coordinators. When you find one, cover it up with your finger. Then determine if the sentences on either side of it are both full sentences: Can they stand alone as sentences? If there are full sentences on both sides of the coordinator, then place a comma before the coordinator.

Editing for comma splices

Skim the paper, stopping at every comma, See if there is a complete sentence on each side of it. If there is, you have a comma splice.

> Use a more decisive punctuation mark--typically a period or a semicolon--to signal the end of one sentence and the beginning of another. The fact that you have spliced two sentences together often indicates that you want to stress that they are closely related sentences. In such a case, you can use a semi-colon, or a comma and a coordinator. The semi-colon, in fact, is used to join closely related sentences.

Editing for introductory commas

Check the first two or three words of each sentence to determine if it needs closer examination.

Introductory elements of a sentence tend to establish either time or condition. As a result, the first words of a sentence provide a tip as to whether or not you will need an introductory comma. If the first words of the sentence suggest that you are being teased and that the primary information is being withheld until time or condition are established, there will be a break point where you should insert a comma to signal that you are going to disclose primary information. To see this in action, re-read the previous sentence. The word if indicates that a conditioned is being established.) Until you get a feel for the kinds of words that establish time or condition at the beginning of a sentence (such as when, if, because, although) you can refer to a list of subordinators. The Writing Resource Center has such a list, or check a writing handbook index under subordinating conjunctions.

Editing for commas used with afterthoughts

[more to come] [see the Punctuation Pattern Sheet]

Editing for commas used with non-essential information

[more to come] [see the Punctuation Pattern Sheet]

Editing for fragments

Check each sentence to ensure that it has a subject and a verb. Pay special attention to any sentence that begins with a word that signals clarification.

Most fragments are actually pieces of sentences that can be attached to the sentence just before or after the fragment. You can scan for fragments by looking for "sentences" that begin with and, because, such as, or other words that indicate that an explanation is coming up (These are the same subordinators mentioned in introductory commas, above). Make sure these word groups have a subject and a verb. (It's perfectly legal to start a sentence with and or but. The and or but do not make the sentence a fragment. Lack of a subject or verb make it a fragment.)

To fix fragments: See if the word group can simply be attached to the sentence just before it, or it goes with the sentence just after it. This is the most common solution. If the fragment doesn't connect readily to either of the surrounding sentences, you'll need to give it a subject or verb.

How to find subjects and verbs

First, forget what your high school teacher told you, and set aside the niceties of grammatical terminology. We're here to edit, so we'll use a functional grammar. Here's the quick and dirty--but foolproof--way of the finding main (or logical) subject and verb of a sentence:

Look for the verbs first. The verbs will be the only word or group of words that change form when you change the tense. Read the sentence you've written, but change the tense. That is, if you wrote "The lawyer shuffled her notes," read it in the present or future tense to find the verb: "The lawyer shuffles her notes" or "The lawyer will shuffle her notes." The main verb is shuffles as it is the only word (or word group) that changes when you change the tense.

Once you have the verb, use it to find it to the subject. The subject is the group of words that the verb refers to: Ask, who shuffles her notes? The lawyer. The lawyer is the subject of this sentence.

This technique works with all sentences--even the most complex and contorted and with those that have more than one verb.

[example]

And it works for sentences that use be-verbs (forms of is). Here's the original:

> Because drafts come to the writing assistants in read-only versions, the possibility of micro-editing is more limited than it is in face-to-face tutoring, and writing assistants are prompted to make more holistic comments and suggestions than they are in face-to-face settings.

And here's the sentence with the verbs (in past tense) and their subjects marked:

> Because **drafts** *came* to the writing assistants in read-only versions, **the possibility of micro-editing** *was* more limited than **it** *was* in face-to-face tutoring, and **writing assistants** *were prompted* to make more holistic comments and suggestions than **they** *were* in face-to-face settings.

Editing for subject-verb agreement

- **Isolate the main verb in each sentence. Then match that verb to its subject and make sure they agree in number: singular to singular, plural to plural.**

[more to come]

Editing for pronoun reference and agreement

Skim the paper for each pronoun. When you find one, skim backwards until you find the noun it is replacing. The noun may be in the same sentence as the pronoun, or it may not.

1) Make sure that the noun and pronoun agree in number. Note that the words everyone and someone are considered singular, and that every and each make the noun following it singular:

Everyone forgot their his or her book.

Each student was concerned that their his or her books were costing too much.

Or better,

Each student was concerned that books were costing too much.

2) If you can't find the noun that the pronoun is referring back to, or if you have difficulty finding it, take that as a signal that a reader might have difficulty too. You can

a) insert a noun for the pronoun to refer to

b) change the pronoun to the appropriate noun, or

c) see if the sentences can be drawn closer together or consolidated.

Editing for misplaced modifying phrases

[more to come]

Editing for parallel sentence structure

Check the words or word groups used in a series, and check words or word groups joined by and and or. Make sure that each item in the series match in grammatical form.

> This sounds tough, but think of it as if it were basic math. If you want to add fractions and whole numbers, you must first convert the fractions to decimals or the whole number to fractions. Parallel structure works the same way. To link elements in parallel (subjects, verbs, adjectives and adverbs), you need to make them match in form. · * I like working, sleeping, and to ski. non-parallel · I like working, sleeping, and skiing. parallel - ing forms · I like to work, to sleep, and to ski. parallel to + verb forms

Editing for missing words

Read your paper backwards. Start with the last sentence, then read the second to the last, and so on.

> If you're plagued with the problem of letting your mind get ahead of your hand, it will probably happen to you as a reader, too, especially when you're reading your own work, so you shouldn't expect to catch missing words with a line-by-line reading. You need to slow yourself down, paying attention to the presence (or absence) of each word. If you prefer to read straight through, use a strategy to slow your reading pace, such as placing your pencil on each word as you read it, or using a piece of paper to cover all the lines below those you are currently reading (This is what professional proofreaders do.) Any strategy that will help you be a careful rather than a speed reader will be useful.

A Few Myths About Sentences
Or
Things you might want to unlearn to help you edit

"Never start a sentence with *and* or *but*."

There's no such grammatical rule. And it is done all the time. In some situations, starting a sentence with *and* or *but* is inappropriate, and by all means use the technique sparingly. But a full sentence starting with *and* or *but* is still a legitimate sentence.

"Keep your sentences short and simple."

Often complex thoughts demand complex sentences. And you're writing for readers who can handle complex sentences - if they are clear sentences. Your teachers aren't fifth-graders anymore.

Edit your sentences so that they are only as long as necessary to suit the purpose. You do this by editing out unnecessary words - words that don't carry much meaning - and by rephrasing sentences so that the subject is up front, at the beginning of the sentence.

A good way to spot longer-than-necessary sentences is to skim for sentences that begin with *There is*, *There are*, and *It is*. These word groups signal that you're holding off getting to the point for a moment. Reconsider these sentences; rephrase them beginning with the subject of the sentence so you can edit out the *there is*. If the sentence sounds more direct, more to the point, use the new version. If you want to slow the reader down a little, use the original.

A good approach is to vary sentence your length, using long and short sentences. This prevents a monotonous feel to the reading. But, again, you need to make choices about sentence length in light of what you're saying in the sentence and what you want the sentence to do. If you're trying to connect complex causes and effects, or pull together an argument while making sure you've qualified everything carefully, a longish sentence can do it. A short one following helps. (Re-read that passage to see the effect.)

"Never use passive sentences. Write 'John eats rocks,' not 'Rocks are eaten by John.'"

Compare the two sentences about John. Notice how the verb is sandwiched between *are* (it can be *is* or any form of *be* in other cases) and *by*. That's how to spot a passive: Skim for a verb sandwiched between a be-verb and the word *by*.

It's up to you to decide whether a passive sentence is appropriate in the given context: given what you're writing, who you're writing for, and what you want to do. Passive sentences tend to sound very formal, but most readers can see through the formality if it's phony. But in some kinds of writing, such as formal lab reports and some business memos, passive sentences are used quite often to take the focus of the sentence off the do-er and put it on what was done to what. Compare:

> I measured the flexibility of the spring by applying 100 gms of pressure laterally using a Bork-Stephens torque device.
>
> with
>
> The flexibility of the spring was measured by applying 100 gms of pressure laterally using a Bork-Stephens torque device.

Both are legitimate sentences. The second is more likely to be found in a lab report because it carries a guise of objectivity.

Two problems to be aware of in using passives:

> They make the sentence longer and can create errors because passive sentences quickly become overly - and unnecessarily - complex.
>
> They allow you to dodge responsibility. You can get around admitting "I made a mistake" with a passive "Mistakes were made." Good readers will see through this trick, so make your choices wisely.

"Good writers never make mistakes. They can sit down an knock off a perfect paper in one pass."

Many people pretend to this, but it doesn't hold up in court. When you become really familiar and comfortable with a particular kind of writing, or a particular situation of writing - such as writing essay exams or business memos - you reach a point where you can write a first-draft-perfect version. But when you're in a new kind of situation, writing to a new audience, writing in a new form, or dealing with new and complex ideas, might find yourself puzzled and confused, and you'll probably have to write a number of drafts as you work the paper slowly into shape. This is not an "error," nor a sign that you're "doing it wrong." It is a normal process of learning. Give yourself time when encountering a new kind of writing task.

"There's one best way of writing a paper, of getting it right."

Like the myth that "Good writers never make mistakes," this one hides a complex truth. If there were One Best Way, a Magic Formula, a Secret Key to Writing Well, we would tell you what it is and you would follow that formula and that would be the end of *that* problem.

Writing is simply not efficient, if by "efficient" we mean "easy" or "proceeding quickly along a single path," or "proceeding by formula or recipe." Writing is one of the most complex cognitive activities human beings engage in. It's not like arithmetic. It's easily as complex and demanding as high-level mathematics or theoretical physics. At each point - at each word, each sentence, and as you entertain each idea or consider just what might go next - there are choices to be made; and each choice influences other choices. We make many of these choices unconsciously or by habit - remembering a spelling, for instance - which lightens the mental load. But we still make choices, consider implications, posit alternatives, and try to decide what choice to make all along the line. Writing is not like following a well-worn track, it's more like cutting the brush to create the track as you go. That's work. And there's no guarantee that you'll discover something at the end of the path you cut.

Still, if you don't start, you'll never get there.

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